

Christian Moraru. *Memorious Discourse: Reprise and Representation*

[Metadata, citation and similar p](#)

ournal Hosting

Forty years later, it's easy to forget that the earliest accounts of postmodern fiction as "apocalyptic," "absurdist," "black-humorous," or "pop-cultural" understated, if not overlooked, its preoccupation with problems of representation. This shortcoming was largely corrected in the late 70s/early 80s with the ascendancy of what we may call the metafictionist paradigm. Larry McCaffery, Robert Scholes, Christine Brooke-Rose, Patricia Waugh and others, building on the insights of structuralism and narratology, explained how postmodern fiction self-reflexively registered the essential disjunction between literary representation and the world it purported to describe. Subsequently, the paradigm underwent innumerable adjustments to accommodate an ever-expanding range of multiculturalist, political, and poststructuralist concerns. All the same, to this day, the core premise of metafictionist criticism remains indispensable to most commentary on postmodern fiction: "All writing, all composition is construction. We do not imitate the world, we construct versions of it. There is no mimesis, only poesis. No recording. Only constructing" (Scholes 7). And although this (classical) view of mimesis has since been questioned, the metafictionist idea that reality is necessarily grasped in textual form, that life and history make sense only insofar as discourse narrates them into shapely (even novelistic) patterns, still holds. But such overworked formulae elide an important distinction. Typically, we settle for the "slack" version of the representation/reality relation: reality is so much raw material creatively processed or constituted by our discourses. Less often, the "taut" version of this relation obtains: representation engages with a reality that is itself pre-codified; as Derrida puts it, "The so-called 'thing-itself' is always-already a *representamen* shielded from the simplicity of intuitive evidence" (49). Moraru's achievement is that *Memorious Discourse* probes the literary, philosophical, and ideological implications of this latter relation at a range and depth well beyond the usual accounts of intertextuality, simulation, and decentered meaning in postmodern fiction. Here, I should add, one often reads such poststructuralist approaches to postmodern fiction feeling that the concepts of the former are somewhat tentatively grafted onto the latter. However, given Moraru's firm purchase on theory (as evidenced by his fine-grained discussions of Derrida, De Man, Levinas, Lyotard, Baudrillard, and Lacoue-Labarthe), one could not ask for a tighter fit between poststructuralism and the fiction it seeks to illuminate.

Inspired by Borges' short story, "Funes the Memorious," Moraru reconceptualizes postmodernism as "memorious discourse": "Funes's sprawling memory provides me with a trope of postmodern discourse as *representation that operates digressively, and conspicuously so, through other representations*" (22). This metaphor encapsulates the "interrelational nature of postmodern representation, its quintessential intertextuality" (22). The inherently memorious nature of discourse becomes "dominant and distinctive in postmodernism" (24). Indeed, throughout this study, Moraru maintains his sharp focus on the ineluctable fact of intertextuality: "all representations cannot but incorporate previous efforts to interpret, imagine ... the world" (17); "the context is always-already textualized, comes somehow pre-represented..." (164). All textual production turns out to be re-textualization; the "reality" we see has already been fashioned by our culture's representations of it.

This model of an exitless textuality may well suggest entrapment in the proverbial prison-house of language and lend support to the recurrent charge that postmodernism is essentially ahistorical and oblivious to socio-political matters. Moraru, however, invoking his critical metaphor, refutes the charge: "[T]he memorious constitution of the world, the world's intertextual 'packaging'" (164), ensures that postmodern representation "collapses the distance" between text and world, providing for the latter's representability. Postmodern fiction is eminently suited to represent a world which is itself "pregnant with fiction" (193). Thus, to indict postmodernism for its alleged irrelevance to history and the political is to adhere to an outdated, Aristotelian model of mimesis; after all, in a world replete with texts and stories, mimesis in its "imitative-specular sense" (19) must be abandoned in favor of a sense of mimesis which, in the postmodern era, obtains through intertextuality. Moreover, Moraru forestalls possible accusations of excessive textualism by continually appealing (in the spirit of Bakhtin, Foucault, the New Historicists) to the socio-historical nature of discourse: historicity as embedded in texts; language as ideologically animated-issues especially foregrounded in Chapter 2, where he discusses the politics of naming. Whence, representation is necessarily a matter of cultural dialogue; memorious intertextuality opens a space for alternative "re-presentations," for critical reprise, of the (textualized) referent. Unavoidably, memorious discourse situates us in the domain of a culture's politics.

The critical operations of memorious discourse are examined in a variety of contexts: postmodern autobiography (Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak Memory*, Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*, David Antin's *talking at the boundaries*); postmodern onomastics (Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, Don DeLillo's *Ratner's Star*, Kathy Acker's *Don Quixote, Which Was a Dream*, Toni Morrison's *Song*

of *Solomon*); posthumanist ethics (Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, Mark Leyner's *Et Tu, Babe*, DeLillo's *White Noise*, Philip Roth's *The Breast*, Joseph McElroy's *Imp Plus*); the "enframing games" of postmodern ontology (Nabokov's "The Assistant Producer"); the postmodern sublime (DeLillo's *Mao II*, *White Noise*, *Libra*); transnational fiction in the age of globalization (Lee Siegel's *Love in a Dead Language*). It is testimony to the cogency of his thesis that Moraru can encompass such a diversity of issues and writers. Each chapter yields fresh insights and awakens us to the postmodern character of texts which, hitherto, we may not have thought of as postmodern (e.g. *Song of Solomon* or *The Breast*).

Moraru is a younger member of a distinguished group of Romanian expatriate scholars at work in the fields of postmodernism and critical theory. This cohort includes such notables as Matei Calinescu, Mihai Spariosu, Marcel Cornis-Pope, Virgil Nemoianu, and Toma Pavel. Many lived under Ceausescu's totalitarian administration when, given strict censorship laws, literary criticism served in a coded way as a forum for debating political and ideological issues. As Cornis-Pope has observed, "After 1963, criticism played a crucial role in the process of cultural de-Stalinization" (144). A growing dialogue with Western critical theory facilitated critiques of the ideological repression of the regime. The critique of socialist realism is particularly relevant here. The regime's vigorous defense of this monopolistic doctrine necessarily rested on faith in (if not cynical use of) the "mimesis paradigm"; that is to say, faith in the viability of "natural" and "transparent" representation. Accordingly, mimesis became a target of the radical, emancipatory criticism of a new (postmodern) generation of Romanian theorists. They readily embraced the anti-representational and intertextual dynamics of poststructuralism, and the anti-mimetic and self-reflexive aesthetics of postmodernism, as resources for challenging the ideology of mimesis.

Memorious Discourse may be read as another advance of Moraru's continuing ambitious project of exploring questions of representation/re-presentation from the polemical perspectives of postmodernism and critical theory. His first book, *Poetica reflectarii (Poetics of Reflection; 1990)* is subtitled *Essay in the Archaeology of Mimesis*. In *Rewriting* (2001), he reads postmodern writers as undertaking the task of a critical rewriting of 19th-century American fiction, insofar as the myths and mystifications of the latter still constitute a potent ideological force in US culture. *Memorious Discourse* brings to light yet more philosophical and political issues in ways that disrupt our settled views of literary representation. It firmly establishes Moraru as a major voice in the field of literary-postmodernism scholarship, one to be ranked alongside those of Marcel Cornis-Pope, Brian McHale, Linda Hutcheon, Alan Wilde, Larry

McCaffery, Joseph Tabbi, and Patrick O'Donnell. Rigorously argued and elegantly written, *Memorious Discourse* is sure to become, in Moraru's felicitous terminology, a key intertext in the cultural archive, one to which subsequent commentary on postmodern fiction will be memoriously indebted.

Paul Maltby

Works Cited

- Cornis-Pope, Marcel. "Critical Theory and the *Glasnost* Phenomenon: Ideological Reconstruction in Romanian Literary and Political Culture." *College Literature* 21.1 (1994): 131–55.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976.
- Moraru, Christian. *Poetica reflectarii*. Bucharest: Univers P. 1990.
- . *Rewriting: Postmodern Narrative and Cultural Critique in the Age of Cloning*. Albany: SUNY P, 2001.
- Scholes, Robert. *Structural Fabulation*. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1975.

Jennifer Blair, Daniel Coleman, Kate Higginson, Lorraine York, eds.
ReCalling Early Canada: Reading the Political in Literary and Cultural Production. Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 2005. Pp. 412. \$34.95 pb.

Over the past few decades, scholars working on early Canadian texts may well have had reason to feel that their area of research has been unduly neglected within the field of Canadian literary studies. A lingering Modernist bias in Canadian literary culture against things Victorian, and the influence of post-1960s Canadian literary nationalism are two factors that have contributed to a general privileging, in many Canadian English departments, of contemporary writing over historically-based inquiries into older forms of cultural and literary production. As the editors of *ReCalling Early Canada* point out in their introduction, there are in Canada "no scholarly journals or professional associations dedicated to ... historical areas of research," or at least none that direct themselves specifically toward an audience grounded in the disciplines of English or Cultural Studies. It is this relative inattention to the study of early Canadian texts that this volume seeks to redress and it does so admirably.

The book is the product of a 2003 conference hosted by the Department of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University. Not surprisingly,